

The Standoff In Lithuania

Deep Defiance Meets Kremlin Suppression

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VILNIUS, Lithuania, March 28 — The Kremlin's decision to try to draw a veil over Lithuania's independence crisis by ridding the republic of foreign journalists amounts to a tribute of sorts to the increasingly fragile presidency of Vytautas Landsbergis.

It showed the depth of President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's sensitivity to the notoriety that has accrued over his handling of the crisis. It also suggested that Mr. Landsbergis might at least be holding his own within his odd little Alamo of public relations monologues that keeps him going through one uncertain day after another.

Today once again demonstrated the delicate health of Lithuania's claim of independence. Officials celebrated, as if it were a victory, the mere fact that the Soviet troops that have been harassing the fledgling Government with night forays caused no incidents today.

Some Formidable Psychology

The Soviet powers of harassment and psychological sniping have proved formidable, with army helicopters dropping leaflets onto a citizenry long cynical toward propaganda.

At the same time, Mr. Landsbergis has been doggedly responding with the one power of office he has over Mr. Gorbachev, trying to embarrass the Soviet leader before his growing circle of Western friends.

In the 17 days since independence was proclaimed, no foreign government has formally recognized Lithuania. But Western leaders have admon-

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ished the Kremlin in response to the Lithuanian leader's daily accounts of Soviet bullying.

President Landsbergis has fashioned his initiatives from the images the Soviets have offered, notably the young Lithuanian deserters from the Soviet Army, some bloodied on Tuesday morning when their hospital shelter was raided by arresting paratroopers.

Plea From Lithuanian

He has pleaded with the West to speak out for Lithuania and see Mr. Gorbachev as someone more complicated and Machiavellian than the celebrated champion of Soviet change.

"We are not fighting against the Soviet Union; we just feel pity," Mr. Landsbergis declared in a long rambling news conference tonight. He once again dolefully made a virtue of the breakaway republic's defenselessness, in contrast to the series of blatantly tough Soviet moves.

Some of the prizes at stake in the Soviet midnight raids hardly amount to the high ground in Mr. Gorbachev's battle for perestroika. Very few city dwellers, for example, could direct visitors to the Marxist-Leninist Institute, that fell unchallenged the other night to a squad of riflemen.

For its part, the Landsbergis Government, also has no shortage of pyrrhic victories.

Word From North Carolina

Today, it hailed a phone call of support from Ann Smith, an aide to Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, without commenting on the fact that Senator Helms himself never got on the line.

Miss Smith reportedly passed on the Senator's assurances that "the Congress will turn out the lights" on the new détente if Lithuania should not prevail. The Vilnius Government was delighted to hail the word of a Senate aide as a breakthrough.

As the night belongs to the Soviet Army staff, busy plotting offensives against usually empty Communist Party buildings, the day belongs to President Landsbergis's rhetorical forays.

This morning he appeared on the NBC News program "Today" in America and Europe, in simple, artful depiction of Lithuania's plight, evoking once more what he called the 1940 sellout of Lithuania to Soviet annexation.

He manages to linger on such points even as journalists step up their questions to him about whether the independence drive lacks a strategy to match its fervor. By all evidence, the Government's main strategy is to wait for something to happen elsewhere, for better or worse.

Accordingly, Mr. Landsbergis and his aides ricochet between extremes of pessimism and ebulliency through a typical day, with occasional stream-of-consciousness estimates of the situation.

"We are ready for them," Mr. Landsbergis said tonight, suddenly moving from a theme of hope to the expectation of more midnight cat and mouse from the Kremlin. "It is interesting for us to look at the world and wonder what the world holds valuable."

In counting on the power of words, Lithuanian officials effectively endorsed the rationale of the Kremlin's

gradual banning of foreign journalists. While the Kremlin said reporters had best be kept from involvement in the republic's mass information maneuvers, the Landsbergis Government pleaded that they stay to bolster independence.

Press Corps Fades Away

Even as Mr. Landsbergis honed his words, however, the Soviet power in Lithuania was being demonstrated, for the press corps shrank rapidly by the hour as their limited-stay Soviet permits ran out.

Western journalists who travel in the Soviet Union must tell the Foreign Ministry of their plans in advance, noting a departure and return date. Most of the journalists who have been in Lithuania have already started to go back to Moscow, as their stated return dates have passed. A number of journalists are still in Lithuania, but most will probably have to go back to the capital in the first days of April.

To the east, Soviet state-controlled news outlets were heightening their misinformation on Lithuania, describing it as almost dangerously rebellious. In fact, the republic was drifting through a funny, almost boring afternoon, with its Parliament relishing the drone of debate as a symptom of self-government.

Such mere words were enough to keep Mr. Landsbergis as President for another day. True, he waited for the conciliatory word that never came from Mr. Gorbachev and the word of recognition that never came from the West, but he seemed to find comfort in his own words.

Asked about his strategy in all this, he responded in steady, near-plodding words, "I believe we will manage and we will persevere and we will maintain hope."

Gorbachev Discusses Crisis With Thatcher

MOSCOW, March 28 (Reuters) — President Mikhail S. Gorbachev discussed the crisis in Lithuania with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain today, British officials and the official press agency Tass reported.

Mrs. Thatcher had telephoned Mr. Gorbachev to congratulate him on his recent elevation to the new post of Soviet President, Tass said. The talks were apparently Mr. Gorbachev's first with a Western leader on Lithuania since the republic declared independence from the Soviet Union on March 11.

Tass gave no details of the talks, other than that Mr. Gorbachev had "replied to Thatcher's questions" and "described the developments in Lithuania which have emerged as a result of the violation of the Soviet Constitution."

In London, British officials said the conversation lasted about 50 minutes, about half of which was taken up with translation.

On Lithuania, "The Prime Minister reiterated her call for restraint on both sides," a Thatcher aide said.

The officials declined to comment on Mr. Gorbachev's response, but said there was "no dissatisfaction" on Mrs. Thatcher's part.

Asked about the tone of the discussion, the aide described it as very good.